

Dvar Torah Vay'hi

This week's parashah is Vay'hi, which means "he lived." The root of the word is "chai" – life. Who is the "he" in that sentence? Of course, it's the patriarch Jacob.

Now there's one other parashah of all the 54 weekly parshiot that also has the root "chai" in its title. That is Hayei Sarah, which we read 7 weeks ago. What's the one thing that's most similar about these 2 parshiyot? Even though they have "life" in their names, they both deal largely with the subject of death.

And not just the deaths of the characters, but also their funeral arrangements. So much of Hayei Sarah deals with Abraham's negotiating to purchase the cave of Machpelah from the Hittites as a family burial plot, and so much of Vay'hi deals with the elaborate arrangements for Jacob's burial.

Now there is one parashah that has the word "death" – "mot" or "mavet" in the title, it's in the book of Leviticus. Which one is that? It's "Aharei Mot", which means "after the death." What you expect to be discussed after the death of someone? Well, the burial, perhaps a retrospective on the person's life. In fact, no one dies in Aharei Mot – well, unless you count the goat that gets sacrificed, in the details of the rules for the Yom Kippur ritual, and even that death is tempered by the fact that the other goat lives! Anyway, the death of two of Aaron's sons is only mentioned as a placeholder in time, nothing about them is mentioned at all. So all of the "life and death" parshiot are in fact named ironically.

This past week, Margie and I finally stopped procrastinating, and after years, we finally went to see a lawyer to update our wills and

to prepare trusts. So, maybe that fact, as I was reading through the text of today's parashah, colored my view of it, so that I became fascinated by deaths in the Torah, especially in the book of Breishit, which we concluded just a few minutes ago.

Way back at the end of parashat Breishit, in chapter 5, we got the full genealogy of the 10 generations from Adam to Noah, and frankly –well, it's rather boring. Someone is born, at a certain age he gives birth to a son, he lives a specified additional number of years, and he dies. No death scenes, no burial information. There are absolutely no details about any person's life. Every one of them just up and died – in Hebrew "vayamot." About the only thing that is at all interesting is the lengths of those lives. Those were much, much longer lives than people live now, or even much longer than people lived in the generations just after the flood. Now both Jewish and Christian religious scholars, particularly the latter, as well as secular Biblical interpreters, have written dozens of articles speculating on what the symbolic values of those numerical lifespans might be. If you're a math nerd, you might love this stuff, and we can discuss it at Kiddush, and if not, well, I'll spare you.

The story of the 10 generations from Noah to Abraham, on the other hand, details things differently. First of all, people now have not just one son each, but they have multiple progeny. Many of these are named, but in addition, many "begat sons and daughters." Interestingly, we are told that Noah himself died, again with the simple word "vayamot," but that term is not used for any of the 8 intervening "pre-patriarchs" until we get to the very end of parashat Noah. There, we are told that Avram's youngest brother, Haran (who was Lot's father), died while their father Terah was still alive, again a simple "vayamot," and in the very last verse of the

parashah Terah himself dies. Again, for both of these, a simple “vayamot.” Of note, Terah’s life span was 205 years, and he is the last person in the Torah to live past the 2-century mark.

With the beginning of parashat Lech L’cha, and the story of Abraham, things change. We learn a lot about people’s lives, their families, their travels and struggles. And their deaths. And perhaps more importantly, their old age, how they lived out their final days, and how they prepared for their deaths.

Verse 1 of Genesis Chapter 24 in parashat Hayei Sarah might be my favorite verse in the whole Tanach. After successfully negotiating for a family burial plot, the Torah says, “Abraham was now old, coming on in days, and Adonai had blessed Abraham with everything.” “Vadonai bayrach et Avraham bakol.” Wow! That is the ultimate that anyone could hope for. Yet he still has one more loose end to tie up before he can peacefully exit this world, which is to get a wife for his son Isaac. Once that wonderful story is played out, Abraham retires. He lives another 35 years, remarries, has more children, carefully arranges his inheritance, even presumably attends Jacob and Esau’s twin bnai mitzvah. And instead of just dying, there’s a lot more than “vayamot” for Abraham: “Abraham breathed his last (“vayigva”), and he died (“vayamot”) at a good ripe age, old and contented, and he was gathered to his kin.” And his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, estranged from each other before and after, unite just once, to bury him in the cave cemetery that their father had bought.

Now Sarah, on the other hand—we know so much about her funeral preparations, but we know nothing of her death. Literally, she just died (“vatamot,” the feminine form of the verb). Coming, as it did, at the beginning of the parashah, immediately after the

story of the Binding of her son Isaac, we can only surmise that her state of mind was not so contented. Oh, the one thing we do know is how old she was at her death—127 years, and so far as I can find, she is the only woman in the Tanach to be so honored.

Oh, Ishmael—remember him? —also dies at the end of Hayei Sarah. He begets a huge line of descendants. His death gets two words: “vayigva vayamot,” “he breathed his last and he died.” We’ll see more last breaths as the book goes on.

Isaac had a lengthy old age. He was already blind when he blessed his sons Isaac and Jacob in the ruse set up by Rachel, and he was alive when Jacob returned from Haran some 21 years later. The description of Isaac’s death in parashat Vayishlach is a positive one, but not quite as good as Abraham’s: “He breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age, and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob.”

What about Rebekah? Well, we know nothing of her final years, her death, or her burial. We only know that she too is buried in the family plot at Machpelah because Jacob mentions that fact in his plea to Joseph that we read earlier today in parashat Vay’hi.

Esau? We know he begat a lot of progeny, and he lived in or near Egypt, but he doesn’t even merit an age at death or even the single word “vayamot.”

The other matriarchs, Rachel and Leah? We don’t know how old they were—Sarah is the only one whose age at death merits mention. Leah’s death is not mentioned at all, and again, we only know of her burial at Machpelah because Jacob says he buried her there in his speech to Joseph. Rachel, of course, had died in

parashat Vayishlach during childbirth of Benjamin, and Jacob was unable to get the family from Ephrat, near Bethlehem, to the family plot at Qiryat Arba, so she was buried there.

Which brings us to today's parashah. Jacob's life has had amazing ups and downs, but his unexpected reunion with Joseph in last week's parashah was the ultimate high, and he gets to live out his retirement in the Goshen district of Egypt for another 17 years. But like Abraham, he too has a few final pieces of business to attend to. First of all, he knows he will die in Egypt, so he makes Joseph swear that the family will take him back to Canaan and bury him at Machpelah. Second, he has some blessing and fortune-telling to do. He adopts Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menasheh, and he blesses them, in a peculiar, drawn-out scene, crossed hands and all, which actually is two different blessing scenes, which in some way parallels the two different blessing scenes when Isaac blessed him and Esau – but that's a topic for another dvar Torah altogether. And he gathers all the family one last time for the blessings of the Tribes. It's to be noted that all three patriarchs had their sons reunite for their funerals.

After the tribal blessings, Jacob “drew his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.” His age is not given, although we can calculate it from elsewhere in Genesis, and of note is that the verb “vayigva” is used, but not “vayamot.”

Finally, Joseph. His death age is given, and it is mentioned that he lived to see Ephraim's grandchildren, his great-grandchildren. He too has one piece of business to complete before he dies as well. He knows that there is no way he can be carried back to be buried back in Machpelah, but he makes the family members (actually, the text says “his brothers,” but we can understand that to mean their

descendants) swear that someday, “God will indeed notice you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.”

And Joseph then simply died, “vayamot.” No blessings, no old age contentment, no bringing his feet to the bed, not even a “vayigva” taking his last breath. And the cold, final phrase of the book of Breishit: “and he was embalmed, and placed in a coffin in Egypt.” For the dreamer who had led such a charmed life, such a harsh, undeserved death scene.

So, what does all this comparison of deaths mean? To borrow a quote from Tevye: “I’ll tell you, I don’t know!” Maybe some more clever or in-depth analysis will be able to put everything together. Much has been written about the numerology of the life spans of the patriarchs, which I don’t have time to go into today. Only note that if you add up the factors of their death ages a certain way, you get 17 for each. But as we get older, as we all do, and for those of us in that stage of life who are finished our own “begatting” and hoping to be as fortunate as Joseph to someday hold our great-grandchildren, we can try in advance to analyze our own legacies. Will we tie up our loose ends? Will there be anyone to take account of our final breath? Will our children all be there for our funeral? Or will it be said of us simply “vayamot”?

I think each of us can make the effort to strive, in whatever ways we can, to be not just like another person in a long list of “vayamot,” not just a corpse wrapped in a coffin, but rather to be that person about whom it will be said after our final breath, our “vayigva,” that people will say, “he was blessed with everything.”

Shabbat shalom

Gil Brodsky - December 30, 2017

Parashat Vay'hi Deaths of the Patriarchs

Person	age	age factored	died	buried	Citation	family status at death
Terah	205	5x41	Haran	?	11:32 Noah	in transition, bereaved
Sarah	127	(prime)	Qiryat Arba	Machpelah	23:1 Hayyei Sarah	in shock
Abraham	175	7×5^2 (7x5x5)	Beer Sheva	Machpelah	25:7-10 Hayyei Sarah	Sons Isaac and Ishmael joined to bury
Isaac	180	$5 \times 3^2 \times 2 \times 2^2$ (5x6x6)	Qiryat Arba	Machpelah	35:27-29 Vayishlach	Sons Jacob and Esau joined to bury
Rebekah	?		?	Machpelah	(none)	entire family in transit
Ishmael	137	(prime)	near Egypt	?	25:17 Hayyei Sarah	Lots of progeny, reconciled with father but estranged from brother
Jacob	147	$7^2 \times 3$ (7x7x3)	Egypt	Machpelah	47:28, 49:33 Vay'hi	Together, but in exile
Esau	?		?Egypt	?	36:9f Vayishlach	Lots of progeny!
Rachel	?		near Bethlehem	Qever Rachel	35:19 Vayishlach	died in childbirth, family intact but traveling
Leah	?		?	Machpelah	(none)	No mention
Joseph	110	2x5x11	Egypt	Egypt (embalmed)*	50:26 Vay'hi	together, but in exile
Sibs	?		Goshen, Egypt	Goshen, Egypt	Ex 1:6 Shmot	together, but in exile